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ABSTRACT

Linguistics can make major contributions to the undergraduate liberal arts curriculum, as exemplified in the relationship between linguistics and the English curriculum. The major points of contact between English and linguistics are the areas of stylistics and poetics. In the study of English, linguistics can enrich descriptions of texture (stylistics) and constrain theoretical claims (poetics). Through stylistics and poetics, linguistics can influence the undergraduate English curriculum from freshman composition to the senior seminar. The influence will increase to the extent that linguists do not make exaggerated claims of superior validity for the facts their theoretical analyses of texts uncover, and that English scholars resist the temptation to impute "scientism" to linguistics. (MSE)

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LINGUISTICS IN THE UNDERGRADUATE CURRICULUM

APPENDIX 4-L

Stylistics and Poetics

by

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PREFACE

The Linguistics in the Undergraduate Curriculum (LUC) project is an effort by the Linguistic Society of America (LSA) to study the state of undergraduate instruction in linguistics in the United States and Canada and to suggest directions for its future development. It was supported by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities during the period 1 January 1985-31 December 1987. The project was carried out under the direction of D. Terence Langendoen, Principal Investigator, and Secretary-Treasurer of the LSA. Mary Niebuhr, Executive Assistant at the LSA office in Washington, DC, was responsible for the day-to-day administration of the project with the assistance of Nicole VandenHeuvel and Dana McDaniel.

Project oversight was provided by a Steering Committee that was appointed by the LSA Executive Committee in 1985. Its members were: Judith Aissen (University of California, Santa Cruz), Paul Angelis (Southern Illinois University), Victoria Fromkin (University of California, Los Angeles), Frank Heny, Robert Jeffers (Rutgers University), D. Terence Langendoen (Graduate Center of the City University of New York), Manjari Ohala (San Jose State University), Ellen Prince (University of Pennsylvania), and Arnold Zwicky (The Ohio State University and Stanford University). The Steering Committee, in turn, received help from a Consultant Panel, whose members were: Ed Battistella (University of Alabama, Birmingham), Byron Bender (University of Hawaii, Manoa), Garland Bills (University of New Mexico), Daniel Brink (Arizona State University), Ronald Butters (Duke University), Charles Cairns (Queens College of CUNY), Jean Casagrande (University of Florida), Nancy Dorian (Bryn Mawr College), Sheila Embleton (York University), Francine Frank (State University of New York, Albany), Robert Freidin (Princeton University), Jean Berko-Gleason (Boston University), Wayne Harbert (Cornell University), Alice Harris (Vanderbilt University), Jeffrey Heath, Michael Henderson (University of Kansas), Larry Hutchinson (University of Minnesota, Minneapolis), Ray Jackendoff (Brandeis University), Robert Johnson (Gallaudet College), Braj Kachru (University of Illinois, Urbana), Charles Kreidler (Georgetown University), William Ladusaw (University of California, Santa Cruz), Ilse Lehiste (The Ohio State University), David Lightfoot (University of Maryland), Donna Jo Napoli (Swarthmore College), Ronald Macaulay (Pitzer College), Geoffrey Pullum (University of California, Santa Cruz), Victor Raskin (Purdue University), Sanford Schane (University of California, San Diego), Carlota Smith (University of Texas, Austin), Roger Shuy (Georgetown University), and Jessica Wirth (University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee).

Viewed in its broadest scope, linguistics touches nearly every discipline in the humanities and social sciences, many in the natural sciences, and, as collaborative research and teaching go forward in law, education, and medicine, an increasing number of the professional fields. Linguistics serves as an embracing, supportive discipline in fields outside itself for which the study of language is significant. An important member of this group is the discipline of English. In what follows, I shall adopt English as an example of a field whose interpenetrating relationships with linguistics epitomize a major contribution that linguistics makes to the undergraduate liberal arts curriculum. For English, linguistics can make an even more significant contribution: lending a unity of concerns to a multifaceted discipline.

Today the major points of contact between English and linguistics are in stylistics and poetics. The definition of these fields varies with the user: I shall use "stylistics" to mean an inquiry seeking more and better descriptions of texture, both in literary artworks and in expository prose; I shall use "poetics" to describe contributions to what has come to be called literary theory. In the context of English studies, linguistics can enrich descriptions of texture and constrain theoretical claims. Through stylistics and poetics, linguistics can influence the undergraduate English curriculum from freshman composition to the senior seminar. That influence will increase to the extent that linguists do not make exaggerated claims of superior validity for the facts their theoretical analyses of texts uncover, and that English scholars resist the temptation to impute "scientism" to linguistics.

Under the rubric of "stylistics," I want to suggest some contributions that linguistics can make to enriching the study of texture in literary artworks and workaday prose, both subjects of concern to the discipline of English. While these concerns will seem very different at first, I hope it will be understood in the end that they derive from a single linguistic paradigm.

For at least twenty years, it has been fashionable to deride the so-called New Criticism in the study of poetry. Yet the New Criticism, limited as its scope came to be perceived, had the virtue of concentrating the reader's attention upon a poem's text and requiring the reader to account in terms of speaker and dramatic situation for features of that text. While modern linguistics arose from an intellectual milieu quite different from that of the New Criticism, it sustains part of the New Critical tradition by providing new descriptive frameworks for the texture of poems. Here I will focus on syntactic texture.

Consider the case of Coleridge's "Kubla Khan." Years ago the eminent Coleridgean scholar Elisabeth Schneider (1953) called the poem "a fragment with a postscript added at some later time when it became obvious to the poet that he could not finish the piece." That judgment remained largely unchallenged until an Anglo-American linguist, Timothy R. Austin,

conclusively demonstrated (1977) the poem's unity in purely formal terms. That unity depends, Austin showed, upon various strategies of preposing -- the shifting of grammatical units to the left of their normal position in English syntax -- of sentence elements that occur at crucial points in the poem, particularly at the beginning and near the end. Coleridge wrote "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure-dome decree," not "Kubla Khan decreed a stately pleasure-dome in Xanadu." Austin shows how each of the syntactic transformations required to achieve the poem's highly marked but still grammatical word order -- subject-auxiliary and verb-object inversion, among others -- work to depict a conflict evident here and elsewhere in Coleridge's poetry between the reclusive and the engaged life. The poem resolves that conflict in favor of the latter. Austin shows, using aspects of Mark Liberman's work on intonation, when similar preposing at the poem's climax requires the discourse's pitch to rise progressively to its highest point on the first word of "I would build that dome in air" ("Could I revive within me / Her symphony and song / To such a deep delight 'twould win me / That with music loud and long / I would build...."). Thus, on this argument, "Kubla Khan," far from being a fragment with a postscript, is a highly unified poem central to the Coleridgean canon.

Linguistics has made similar, if less dramatic, contributions to the study of literary prose, but these are difficult to summarize. I shall merely remark upon what I believe to be the best (and among the most difficult) of these, Ann Banfield's Unspeakable Sentences (1982), a theoretical but richly documented study of narrative fiction and the style indirect libre, and turn to the uses of linguistics in that other major concern of any department of English, expository composition.

The most significant and practical contribution of linguistics to the theory and teaching of expository composition has been Joseph Williams's Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity & Grace (2d edition, 1985). While considerations of "grace" are important to what English departments do in the theory and practice of composition, I shall restrict myself here to that portion of Williams's study that most clearly derives from issues in linguistics, namely clarity. Clarity, for Williams, arises from one very simple, very powerful principle of revision. That principle requires the writer to express the inherently movable units of a sentence's meaning -- Agent, Action, and Goal, in the inherently fixed-order slots of a sentence's grammar: Subject, Verb, and Complement.

For Williams, a turgid, overly complex style results when a writer expresses crucial actions not as specific verbs, but as nominalizations, as in:

> Proving the existence of bias on the part of the employer is dependent upon the production of evidence of his refusal to interview minority applicants.

As a first revision strategy, the writer takes the nominalizations proving, production, and refusal and makes them into verbs (prove, produce, and refuse). This process forces the writer to search for agents for those actions (sc. subjects for those verbs). Who proves? Who produces? Who refuses? When the revision is complete, units of meaning and units of grammar are aligned, and the prepositional phrases and other verbiage necessitated by the shift from canonical word order disappear:

> In order to prove the employer is biased, you must produce evidence that he refused to interview minority applicants.

While no writer will want to compose in exclusively this verbal style, Williams convincingly demonstrates that this kind of revision clears out the underbrush from needlessly complex prose and clarifies opportunities for further revision that, for example, allows control of point of view through functional sentence perspective, a concept of Prague Circle linguistics.

While much other work on the theory and practice of composition draws to varying degrees (and with varying degrees of success) on linguistics -- George Dillon's Constructing Texts (1981) and E. D. Hirsch's The Philosophy of Composition (1977) to name but two --, Williams's does so most directly and, together with the work of Austin and others on the syntactic texture of poetry, raises the question of what the undergraduate must know in order to make use of these contributions from linguistics to the concerns of English studies.

For reasons that I shall expand on below, every student in a language-and-literature discipline (including English and the foreign languages) should have training in linguistic theory, including the analysis of competing linguistic theories. Analytical skills are the primary contribution that linguistics can make to the study of literature, and a course in linguistic theory gives a student analytical tools that are much more explicit (not necessarily better, merely more explicit) than those of traditional and modern literary criticism. The same can be said, mutatis mutandis, for the contribution of linguistics to student work in expository writing.

In addition to acquiring the linguist's analytical habits of mind, the undergraduate student in these fields needs to know a basic array of facts about the English language: the history and general structure of English; the patterns of English syntax; the structure of discourse; and the sound pattern of English, its phonology, including at least a full account of English stress. To the extent that these concerns are not taken up in the first three areas I suggest, the student also should know something about semantics and pragmatics. In essence, I suggest that if modern stylistics and poetics are to be integrated with the undergraduate English major (the same concerns apply to their integration with foreign-language majors), a student must have a thorough grounding in English grammar (broadly construed) and the theory by which that grammar can be described.

The contributions of poetics -- those aspects of linguistic fact and theory that bear on a general theory of poetry, again broadly construed -- to recent work in literary theory are more problematic and controversial. Whether or not one agrees with the proposition implicit in most work holding itself out as literary theory that it materially differs from what was known for the previous half-century as literary criticism, the current work of Derrida, Lacan, and Eagleton, among many others has at its heart the role of language in literary artworks. Poetics can work on the one hand to enrich this work, and on the other to constrain many of the claims that some of its practitioners have made.

Writing in the tradition of the late Roman Jakobson, Paul Kiparsky produced a brilliant and, in the literary community, little-noticed, essay (1973) on poetics asserting that poetry is, at bottom, the repetition of linguistic sames. A trivial case of this kind of repetition is rhyme; a much richer case is parallelism. In a rigorous syntactic analysis, Kiparsky shows how this concept, fuzzily described in most poetic analyses, can differentiate the characteristic practices of poets. For Walt Whitman, Kiparsky shows, the equivalence typical of parallelism exists only for large syntactic units; for Dylan Thomas, that equivalence works from the largest to the smallest units of his poetic language. In order to make this kind of analysis, which is typical of poetics, the student must be able to analyze different levels of syntactic structure and have the theoretical acumen sufficient to see similarities of pattern in poetic structures that do not yield them up easily.

A similarly rich contribution of poetics to literary theory has been the research on poetic meter of Morris Halle and Samuel Jay Keyser (1971) and their co-workers. Under Halle-Keyser theory, an iambic line is metrical if no odd-numbered metrical position is both stressed and flanked by metrical positions that are unstressed; otherwise it is unmetrical. This claim is simple but very strong, and it is borne out in the literature: even allowing for the purported counterexamples raised in the many books and articles that have flowed from this research, only a handful of lines in the entire corpus of metered poetry in English from the Renaissance to the present have been found to violate this rule.

Construction of this theory depends upon the ability to deduce and formalize, just the qualities fostered by training in linguistic theory. The way to this theory is not clear until one abandons the notion of "foot" in English poetry and realizes that there are rules by which syllables or groups of syllables come to constitute metrical positions. Metrical positions, not syllables or feet, are the primes of English metered verse. The theory then does what properly constructed theories are expected to do: predicts what will be a metrical line, rules out on a principled basis possible but unmetrical lines, and makes the most general statement about English meter consistent with the facts.

Training in linguistic theory and its application to poetics also can help students give more critical readings of modern literary theory in general, much of which is based upon its practitioners' views of aspects of language. The project of reader response criticism, for example, was held out by its proponents as an aspect of literary theory, when in fact it turned out to be merely an interesting intuition unsupported either by the facts of language or by what we know about the process of reading. Reader response had a run of about a decade, finally expiring not because it was proven to be wrong (I shall attempt below to falsify a fundamental precept of reader-response theory and to demonstrate the incorrectness of a literary analysis that follows from it) but because it fell out of fashion.

The theory of reader response was summarized by the critic Stanley E. Fish (1972) as follows: "an analysis of the developing responses of the reader in relation to the words [of a passage of literature] as they succeed one another in time.... A reader's response to the fifth word in a line or sentence is to a large extent the product of his responses to words one, two, three, and four." (387-8)

A simple exercise in transformational syntax demonstrates that the second sentence of the foregoing quotation is false. In the sentence "John asked Bill to shave him," the reader responds to the sixth word, "him," as referring to the first word, "John," and not the third word, "Bill," for reasons having nothing to do with the sequence of these words (the reader's response to "Bill was asked by John to shave him" is identical) and everything to do with a relatively complex computation that the reader (or hearer) makes of the structure of this little sentence, a computation that among other things causes him/her to accept the sentence as grammatical even though it appears to violate the rule of reflexive formation (roughly speaking, pronouns occurring after the subject that are co-referential to the subject are reflexive in form). The principle that structure, not sequence, is what counts in syntax is among the first concerns of an introductory course in syntax. Had the generations of English graduate students who studied reader response theory over the ensuing decade studied some syntax first, that theory might have been discarded not because it became unfashionable but because it is in error.

The same kind of analysis, had it been widely available in the literary community, might have ruled out some analyses of reader response by giving a better account of the facts on which they are based. My target again is an analysis by Fish; Fish's work is the object of my criticism here only because he is by far the best of the modern literary theoreticians and his claims are the most coherent. Fish grounds an elaborate account of a reader's putative response to a passage from Sir Thomas Browne's Religio Medici upon the premise that the phrase "That Judas perished by hanging himself" can mean only "the fact that Judas perished by hanging himself." This claim is factually incorrect

(compare "That the moon is made out of green cheese is open to doubt"; no assertion of fact is made for either the proposition about Judas or the one about the moon), and so is the structure of interpretation that Fish founds upon this assertion (I have explored this and similar interpretations in more detail in Freeman 1987).

Poetics, as that subdiscipline is practiced in departments of linguistics, thus can be seen to have both a contributory and a constraining effect upon the study of literature. Because of the intensely analytical and highly formalizing habits of mind it induces in students, poetics can provide more and differentiated evidence for critical interpretations. Because of the explicitness that its parent discipline, linguistic theory, insists upon, poetics can provide a principled basis for falsifying statements of literary theory that are wrong, and hence provide stronger arguments for those that are right. Stylistics provides a unified theoretical basis -- the principle that patterns of language have meaning, in both literary artworks and expository prose -- for the two chief concerns of departments of English. Both are essential to the discipline of English, a field in which centrifugal forces are increasing.

These forces have always existed in the field, ever since departments of English achieved something like their present form about a century ago. English departments have alternately embraced and spurned (under various names) composition, rhetoric, philology, and descriptive grammar. Recently, literary theory has demonstrated what appears to be a characteristic of developing fields: they are most exclusionist when they are in the process of developing their philosophy of science -- what counts as evidence, what counts as a claim, what it takes to falsify a claim. This was the situation of linguistics in the 1960's; it is the situation of literary theory today; it may be the situation of composition theory and rhetoric in the 1990's.

Now seems a particularly propitious time for a new synthesis of language, literature, and composition. Theorists of composition have begun to focus on the issue of reception (see Winterowd 1986). In this sub-field, linguists and English scholars have begun to reach out to one another. They have been talking past one another in literary theory, however, notwithstanding the fact that the reader/hearer, the decoder, has been at the center of many literary theorists' concerns. When linguistics began its major theoretical revolution in the late 1950's, it applied a unified body of theory to the production, structure, and reception of language. A similar broadening of theoretical perspective can help to lend more unity to English studies. This kind of theoretical development is a subject with which the field of linguistics has had recent experience and about which it has much of value to contribute.

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